

GRASSROOTS ACTIVISM IS MORE THAN A CAMPAIGN

Morra Aarons-Mele

“ But the super-sized business of politics creates a lapse in responsibility. Who’s minding the store while everyone is out on the stump? ”

The cyclical, cash-rich environment of political campaigns is fertile ground for consultants and vendors who are paid premiums to hit the ground running with ads and talking points that fit into the continuous news cycles. Even better for the professional class are the long campaigns, when budgets matter less than the struggle to win every single day. Now more than ever, as has often been said, politics is a multi-billion dollar “show business for ugly people.”

But the super-sized business of politics creates a lapse in responsibility. Who’s minding the store while everyone is out on the stump? Endless hunger for campaign news marginalizes the work of government and creates headlines like this one from National Public Radio’s Website on April 9, 2008: “Petraeus Hearing a Campaign Stop for Candidates.” A significant Senate hearing on the future of the Iraq War, a matter of

national urgency, was turned into a photo opportunity for the presidential candidates.

Last year, MSNBC devoted 28% of its airtime to election coverage, while Fox News devoted 15% and CNN 12%. According to the Project for Excellence in Journalism, about 2% of television news coverage in March 2008 was dedicated to the Iraq war. Election coverage is exciting, full of all of the possibilities of competition and change. Governing, conversely, is a labyrinth of red tape that often reeks of failures and false starts. We yearn to be hopeful but we have a country to govern.

Governance is not sexy or popular work. But if citizens do not focus on what happens in our national legislature, another four years will fly by with few accomplishments. Digital technology makes campaign obsession all the more appealing. Americans are consuming more election news online than ever before. A recent study from the Pew Internet and American Life Project revealed that twice as many Americans are reading political news online than in 2004.¹⁵

But when our candidates morph into elected officials, when the time for real governing arrives, they need to bring us voters and constituents along with them. Today, advocacy groups such as Moveon.org or the National Rifle Association ask their members to e-mail elected officials or send form letters to newspapers on their behalf. That's it as far as citizen participation in governance goes, even though it is one of the ideals our nation was founded upon. Most elected officials want us to stay out of their way once the election is over.

But who says governance is only for elected officials and non-profits? Grassroots political engagement shouldn't end on Election Day. A candidate's online support base is a valuable commodity that can be used as a mighty civic tool, within the legal limits on fundraising and

15 Kohut, Andrew, "The Internet Gains in Politics," Pew Internet and American Life Project, http://pewInternet.org/PPF/r/234/report_display.asp, downloaded on April 21, 2008.

lobbying, when a candidate becomes an elected official. Just as candidates ask us to participate in an online phone bank to get out the vote in a primary state, a Senator or Representative can ask us to phone bank other citizens to support passage of health care reform in the Senate.

The White House's website has come a long way in eight years, as have the web operations of the congressional and Senatorial Committees. I get e-mails from all of them. But they usually just ask me for money, or tell me nasty things about the opposing side. They don't engage me civically. The most engaging online effort from the White House is the "Barney-Cam" video series about Bush's Scottie dog!

Barack Obama could be the first president to use the Internet as a tool for real civic action, in addition to electioneering.¹⁶ Obama's most significant legislative accomplishment as a U.S. Senator is the Federal Funding Accountability and Transparency Act, co-sponsored with John McCain. The Act directs the White House Office of Management and Budget to create a free, public website (www.USAspending.gov) listing all recipients of federal grants, contracts, and other payments. On his campaign website, Obama promises to use digital technology to open up government to the public, and appoint the first White House Chief Technology Officer. If he wins, we must hold him to this promise and more.

This time around, leaders cannot squander the energy of voters, only to build it back up again as the next election approaches. In this extended 2008 primary election season, the volume of political engagement and media attention is remarkable. But if we are to achieve real change in the "off-season," such as health care reform, we will need our citizens online and ready to act.

16 I am indebted to my friend and colleague Matt Wilson for this discussion.

About the Author

Morra Aarons-Mele is a blogger and political consultant who is also a graduate student at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. In between classes, she covers politics as Political Director for BlogHer.com, the largest site for women bloggers. Morra is also a columnist for the HuffingtonPost.com and TechPresident.com.